

All Saints Sunday November 5, 2023

Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

Growing up, I loved watching Bob Ross and his Joy of Painting videos. I have always been fascinated by those who are skilled at something using their hands and creativity and watching them do that. My mother playing the piano or organ, the skill of hands making something out of wood, even a woman applying their make-up. There is something in that creative process that captivates me every time.

Bob Ross did all of that along with building a beautiful world. His wet-on-wet painting technique meant that with just a few strokes of his knife or brush he could create magnificent trees, craggy mountains, puffy clouds. A few brush strokes that our eyes and minds, our imagination, perceive as an idyllic landscape.

What if that was what Jesus was doing in that Sermon on the Mount that we get the beginning of today? What if Jesus was not giving us a set of rules to follow, but an imaginative description of what God was calling us to?

What if Jesus was putting on his Bob Ross wig and verbally painting not happy trees and bubbling brooks but the world of God's first imagining?

A world where those who are honored are the poor, the meek, and the mourning. A world where we love everyone, including our enemies. Where making sure people have enough is done with no fanfare. Where we trust that God will provide our daily bread and so don't fret over it. A world where God's reign extends everywhere. A world that is ushered into reality in Jesus.

When we are children our imagination and the “real” world overlap with ease. (Is this what Jesus meant when he said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”). In our young minds the floor of the breakfast room becomes a desert landscape. Some chairs and a blanket become a fort. Lava fills the floor of the house except for all the craggy rocks sticking up.

Yet, at the same time, we know that each remains... just the hardwoods of the breakfast room. Dad’s recliner, a straight back chair, and mom’s least favorite throw. A safe place to eventually step onto and go get a snack.

These two realities live one atop another, if only we have the eyes, the imagination, to see.

This divine imagination is one that I have been rediscovering with The Rev. Dr. Sam Giere’s new book *Freedom and Imagination: Trusting Christ in an Age of Bad Faith*.

Often as adults, we drop that child-like imagination. We see only the “real” world. One that, as we have seen recently, can be brutish and ugly. But as followers of Jesus, we actually practice keeping that divine imagination. Of seeing two realities live one atop another. To see in a few brushstrokes, a happy tree.

What is today? Sunday. The day before going back to work and school. But also, All Saints, a day to remember and give thanks for all those faithful who have come before us and made this possible. It is Fall outside, but also the last few weeks of the Season after Pentecost.

When we trust in Jesus Christ, have an ongoing relationship with the one who came down not to judge the world but to save it from itself. When we trust him, we enter into the divine imagination and see around us the world as God sees it. The reign of God already here, if not yet complete. And, like children on the floor, under the blanket, we live as if that were true. We can imagine that, as Jesus proclaimed, the Reign of God has come near. So near that it now is present, through the eyes of faithful imagination.

The prophets of God- whether John of Patmos in his book of Revelations, Amos, or Isaiah. All of them speak of visions they have been given. Ones that seem fantastical, unbelievable. But what if they are glimpses of the divine imagination? What if there, in that imagination, we find the Truth that Jesus says in John that he embodies.

Can we imagine the reality that those who are honored are the ones who make peace well- not those who will “fight” the hardest? Can we imagine a reality where the honored ones are those continually hungering and thirsting not for power, or money, or fame, but for God’s activity to bring vindication and justice to all people.

Those first four sayings of Jesus’ sermon speak of a reversal of circumstances for those who are in want. It is a description of the nature of the reign of heaven. It paints the picture of God’s world and invites us to imagine that it is here already.

The last four describe the ones who are ruled by God already. Who have entered into God’s imagination. Who show mercy and live as if God’s shalom were already here. Who are committed to right relationship with God and fellow humans, who do not falter in the face of persecution because they see the reality

that lies beyond the opposition, the hatred, the physical violence that comes their way. They see, we see, the reign of God at work in the world.

But, you may rightfully say, the world sure doesn't look like that. Just open your eyes to our Southern border, to Ukraine, the Middle East. Are we to just ignore that?

No. Giere puts it this way, "The imagination reconciled in faith in Jesus Christ is not utopian. It is realistic in that it accepts that human life and the life of the cosmos exists within the horizon of death and within the life of Christ. As such, there is suffering and sorrow, sin and death, AND joy and wonder, resurrection and life. The crucifixion of the eternal, incarnate Word holds these two realities together.

When we look into the mirror, then, we see both realities. Being a Christian means trusting in Christ Jesus. It means faith. Trusting in Jesus does not erase suffering, sorrow, sin, and death. Trusting in Jesus reconciles the imagination to see the world in and through Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who believes without seeing."

We are, after all, Theologians of the Cross, we call a thing what it is. But that goes both ways. The world is suffering, death, conflict, AND (in Christ) it is healing, life, and peace. We live holding these two visions in tension, something we Christians who happen to be Lutheran ought to be able to do pretty well. I was at a conversation with author Diana Butler Bass yesterday and she talked about that ability in her own faith.

The author of 1 John also talks about vision, “See what love God has given us, that we should be called children of God, for that is what we are.” Made so by the waters of baptism, the power of God’s Holy Spirit falling upon us. Children of God gifted with God’s imagination, God’s vision, to see the reign of God here already. Overlaid on the “real” world.

To see around us not only those physically present, but that great cloud of witnesses who have joined in the faithful imagination. Mom and dad. Grandma and Grandpa. Aunts and Uncles. A whole host of believers that John of Patmos imagines gathered around the throne of Jesus, even as we gather around this table that is his, and together singing praises for all that he has done. For the great gift of life and imagination he has given us.

This reality is present every time we gather. It is what we mean by the communion of the saints, that when we eat, we do so not only with those in this room, those around the world, but with all our ancestors all the way back to that first Last Supper, and all the way forward to the great heavenly feast when there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

It is what so many churches represent when you see out the back wall the cemetery, whose inhabitants complete the circle of our worship around this table.

But, like all things with the divine imagination, sometimes our vision gets clouded and it needs to be washed clean. By the waters of baptism, and by acts and rituals that renew our imagination.

For us today, it is lighting these candles....